

CHAPTER VII MARY LOUISE CALLS FOR HELP

All the queer hints dropped by the girl that afternoon, concerning the relations between Mr. Joselyn and Mr. Cragg, were confided by Mary Louise to her Gran'pa Jim that evening, while the old Colonel listened with grave interest.

"I'm sure there is some mystery here," declared Mary Louise, "and maybe we are going to discover some dreadful crime."

"And, on the contrary," returned Colonel Hathaway, "the two men may have been interested together in some business venture that resulted disastrously and led Mr. Joselyn to run away to escape his wife's reproaches. I consider that a more logical solution of your mystery, my dear."

"In that case," was her quick reply, "why is Mr. Cragg still writing scores of letters and getting bags full of replies? I don't believe that business deal--whatever it was--is ended, by any means. I think that Ned Joselyn and Old Swallowtail are still carrying it on, one in hiding and the other here--and to be here is to be in hiding, also. And it isn't an honest business, Gran'pa Jim, or they wouldn't be so secret about it."

The Colonel regarded his young granddaughter with surprise.

"You seem quite logical in your reasoning, my dear," he confessed, "and, should your conjectures prove correct, these men are using the mails for illegal purposes, for which crime the law imposes a severe penalty. But consider, Mary Louise, is it our duty to trail criminals and through our investigations bring them to punishment?"

Mary Louise took time to consider this question, as she had been advised to do. When she replied she had settled the matter firmly in her mind.

"We are part of the Government, Gran'pa Jim," she asserted. "If we believe the Government is being wronged--which means the whole people is being wronged--I think we ought to uphold the law and bring the wrong-doer to justice."

"Allowing that," said her grandfather, "let us next consider what grounds you have for your belief that wrong is being committed. Are they not confined to mere suspicions? Suspicions aroused by the chatter of a wild, ungoverned child? Often the amateur detective gets into trouble through accusing the innocent. Law-abiding citizens should not attempt to uncover all the wrongs

that exist, or to right them. The United States Government employs special officers for such duties."

Mary Louise was a bit nettled, failing to find at the moment any argument to refute this statement. She was still convinced, however, that the mystery was of grave importance and she believed it would be intensely exciting to try to solve it. Gran'pa Jim was not acquainted with Ingua Scammel and had not listened to the girl's unconscious exposures; so, naturally, he couldn't feel just as Mary Louise did about this matter. She tried to read, as her grandfather, considering the conversation closed, was now doing. They sat together by the lamplight in the cozy sitting room. But her thoughts constantly reverted to "Old Swallowtail" and to Ingua. At length she laid down her book and said:

"Gran'pa, would you mind if I invited Josie O'Gorman to come here and make me a visit?"

He gave her a curious look, which, soon melted into an amused smile.

"Not at all, my dear. I like Josie. But I can see by your desire to introduce a female detective on the scene that you cannot abandon your suspicion of Mr. Cragg."

"I want to save Ingua, if I can," replied the girl earnestly. "The poor little thing can't go on leading such a life without its ruining all her future, even if her grandfather's brutal threats are mere bluff. And Josie isn't a female detective, as yet; she is only training to be one, because her father has won fame in that profession."

"Josie O'Gorman," said the Colonel, meditatively, "is a wonderfully clever girl. I believe she is better, even now, than a score of average male sleuths. Perhaps it will be a desirable thing for her to come here, for she will be shrewd enough to decide, in a short time, whether or not your suspicions are justified. In the latter case, you will be relieved of your worries. Will you abide by Josie's decision?"

"Will you, Gran'pa Jim?"

"I have considerable confidence in the girl's judgment."

"Then I will write to her at once."

She went to her desk and wrote the following note:

Dear Josie: We are at the dropping-off-place of the world, a stagnant little village of a dozen houses set in an oasis that is surrounded by the desert of civilization. And here, where life scarcely throbs, I've scented a mystery that has powerfully impressed me and surely needs untangling. It will be good practice for you, Josie, and so I want you to pack up at once and come to us on a good long visit. We're delightfully situated and, even if the mystery dissolves into thin air under the sunshine of your eyes, I know you will enjoy the change and our dreamy, happy existence in the wilds of nowhere. Gran'pa Jim wants you, too, as he thinks your coming will do me good, and his judgment is never at fault. So drop me a postal to say when you will arrive and I will meet you at Chargrove Station with our car. Affectionately your friend, Mary Louise Burrows.

Gran'pa Jim read this note and approved it, so next morning Mary Louise walked to the village and deposited it in the postoffice, which located in the front room of Jim Bennett's little residence and was delightfully primitive. Jim was "jus' makin' up the mail bag," he said, so her letter was in time to catch the daily train and would be in Washington, where Josie lived, in the quickest possible time.

Josie O'Gorman was about the same age as Mary Louise and she was the only child of John O'Gorman, famed as one of the cleverest detectives in the Secret Service. Josie was supposed to have inherited some of her father's talent; at least her fond parent imagined so. After carefully training the child almost from babyhood, O'Gorman had tested Josie's ability on just one occasion, when she had amply justified her father's faith in her. This test had thrown the girl into association with Mary Louise and with Colonel Hathaway, both of whom greatly admired her cleverness, her clear head and shrewd judgment. Mary Louise, especially, had developed a friendship for the embryo girl detective and had longed to know her more intimately. So she congratulated herself on the happy thought of inviting Josie to Cragg's Crossing and was delighted that the vague mystery surrounding the Cragg family offered an adequate excuse to urge the girl to come to her. There seemed nothing in the way of such a visit, for Officer O'Gorman, however pleased he might be at his daughter's success in her first detective case, declared Josie yet too young to enter active service and insisted that she acquire further age and experience before he would allow her to enter her chosen profession in earnest. "One swallow," he said, "doesn't make a summer, and the next bird you fly might prove a buzzard, my dear. Take your time, let your wits mature, and you'll be the better for it in the end."

So Mary Louise waited impatiently for Josie's reply, meantime seeing as much of Ingua as she could and trying to cement the growing friendship between them. Ingua responded eagerly to her advances and as old Mr. Cragg was away from home the greater part of the day there was much crossing of the stepping-stones by both girls and more than one "afternoon tea" in the pavilion.

"Do you know," said Ingua one day, in confidential mood, "I haven't had the devils since that time I started to run away and you stopped me? P'r'aps it's because I'm not as hungry as I used to be; but, anyhow, I'm glad I stayed. Gran'dad's been good, too, 'though he's got the 'wakes' ag'in."

"What are the 'wakes'?" asked Mary Louise.

"Can't sleep nights. Goes t' bed on time, ye know, but gits up ag'in an' dresses himself an' walks."

"In the house?"

"No, walks out o' doors. Sometimes he'll come in at jes' daylight; sometimes not till break-fas' is ready."

"And doesn't that make him cross, Ingua?"

"Not a bit. It seems to chirk him up. Yist'day mornin', when he come in, he was feelin' so chipper he give me a cent, an' told me to buy somethin' useful. I guess that's the first cent he ever give me. I've took money o' his'n, but he never give me none afore."

"Oh, Ingua! I hope you haven't stolen money?"

"Nope. Jes' took it. It ain't easy, 'cause he knows ev'ry cent he's got, an' it ain't often he leaves it where I kin git it. P'r'aps he knows it's me, but when I lie out of it he can't do noth'n' but growl-- an' growlin' don't hurt any."

Mary Louise was greatly distressed. This reckless disregard of property rights was of course the direct result of the child's environment, but must be corrected. Ingua resented direct chiding and it was necessary to point out to her the wickedness of stealing in the gentlest possible manner.

"How much money have you taken from your grandfather?" she asked.

"Oh, not much. A nickel, now an' then. He wouldn't stan' for losin' any more, ye see. P'r'aps, altogether, I've swiped twenty-five cents. But once Ned Joselyn

give me a dollar, an' Ol' Swallertail knowed it, an' made me give it to him to save for me. That were the last I ever saw o' that dollar, Mary Louise, so I ain't even with Gran'dad yet."

"Do you think," remarked Mary Louise, "there is ever any excuse for stealing?"

The girl stared at her, coloring slightly.

"Do ye mean Gran'dad, er me?"

"I mean you. He didn't steal your dollar, dear; he merely took it so you wouldn't spend it foolishly."

"An' I merely took them nickels so's I could, spend 'em foolish. There's no fun in spendin' money, seems to me, unless you squander it reckless. That's what I done with them nickels. Candy an' chewin' gum tastes better when you know it's swiped."

Mary Louise sighed. It was so hard to show little Ingua the error of her ways.

"As fer stealin'--out an' out stealin'," continued the girl, with a proud toss of her head, "we Craggs ain't never took noth'n' that don't belong to us from nobody. What a Cragg takes from a Cragg is a Cragg's business, an' when we takes someth'n' from somebody else I'll ask ye to tell me 'bout it."

"Where are you going, Ingua?"

"Home."

"You're not offended, I hope."

"No, but I got work to do. I ain't done my breakfas' dishes yet."

Mary Louise musingly watched the girl cross the river. On the opposite bank she turned to wave her hand and then ran into the cottage. Ingua's code of honor was a peculiar one. Her pride in the Craggs seemed unaccountable, considering she and her grandfather were the only two of the family in existence--except that wandering mother of hers.

But the recent conversation had uncovered a new phase of the mystery. Old Swallowtail was nervous over something; he could not sleep at night, but roamed the roads while others with clear consciences slumbered. There must be some powerful reason to account for the old man's deserting his bed in this manner. What could it be?

When she walked over to the postoffice the girl found the long-looked-for letter from Josie O'Gorman. It said:

Dear Mary Louise: How good you are! I positively need a change of scene and a rest, so I'm coming. To-morrow--by the train to Chargrove. The mystery you hint at will help me to rest. Dad doesn't want me to grow rusty and he has some odd theories I'd like to work out. I haven't an idea what your "mystery" is, of course, but if it enables me to test any one of the O'Gorman theories (a theory is merely a stepping-stone to positive information) I shall bless you forever. And that reminds me: I'm coming as a sewing girl, to help you fix over some summer gowns. You're anxious to give me the work, because I need it, but as we're rather chummy I'm half servant and half companion. (I hate sewing and make the longest stitches you ever saw!) Moreover, I'm Josie Jessup. I'm never an O'Gorman while I'm working on a mystery; it wouldn't do at all. Explain this to dear old Gran'pa Jim.

Between the receipt of this script and to-morrow's train jot down in regular order everything you know concerning the aforesaid mystery. Make it brief; no speculations or suspicions, just facts. Then I won't waste any time getting busy.

Can you hear the rumble of my train? While you're reading this I'm on my way!

Josie

"Good!" murmured Mary Louise, as she folded the letter. "I feel better already. Whatever the mystery of Old Swallowtail may be, Josie is sure to solve it."